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PHOTO CREDIT: Gamuchirai Masiyiwa, GPJ Zimbabwe

KICKER:

QUOTE: “… a rush of fear ran through my nerves because they had been a case of a senior nurse who had died because of coronavirus. I could not sleep for days with the fear that I might die in my sleep,” says Mary.

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Narrative Lead

Harare, Zimbabwe - Mary (CQ_Sourcesheet) (preferred to use second name for fear of losing her job) a nurse at a local public hospital recalls how shaken she was when she tested positive for coronavirus. All the horrific stories that she had heard of people dying due to the disease jammed her mind.

“I went to the staff clinic to get tested and was given 10 days to go home while awaiting my results, the results came on the third day and confirmed my fears, I had tested positive,” says the tall, dark lady.

The outspoken nurse says there was no form of counselling proffered to her or any psychosocial support, she was on her own.

“They called my husband and told him that I was positive and there was no follow up or just checking how I was coping.

“… a rush of fear ran through my nerves because they had been a case of a senior nurse who had died because of coronavirus. I could not sleep for days with the fear that I might die in my sleep.

There was a time when I couldn't breathe properly, and I thought I was slowly losing it," she says.

Like many other in Mary's situation, all she wanted was some form of counselling and psychological support to make her feel that she was not alone and that her institution cared about her wellness.

"I'm anxious and fear going back to work after what I went through especially in an environment where you know that sometimes the personal protective equipment is not sufficient and you have to make do with what is there," she says.

News Value

Zimbabwe has experienced a surge in Coronavirus cases since December last and frontline health workers have not been spared from the infections. The health sector has been grappling with brain drain, inadequate supplies and workers strikes and amid these challenges, frontline health workers who are working in the midst of a pandemic have not been getting counselling or psychosocial support from their institution resulting is some being stressed and traumatized especially after testing positive in the workplace. Since the beginning of the pandemic in March 3389 health workers tested positive and 11 deaths were recorded. (CQ_Health Services Board).

Background

The coronavirus pandemic has affected many countries globally and Zimbabwe has not been spared. However the effects of the pandemic are more dire in a country that already has prevailing challenges in the health sector as noted by 2020 Afrobarometer report tilted ' In Zimbabwe, weak water and health systems heighten vulnerabilities during COVID-19 crisis'(CQ_Link)

"An underfunded health-care system has been further weakened by repeated strikes by nurses and doctors complaining of poor pay and working conditions, some of whom have been fired as a result," notes the Afrobarometer report. **(CQ_Link)**.

In addition, the sector has obsolete equipment, shortage of essential drugs and inadequate personal protective equipment (CQ_Research +Sources)

According to a 2018 paper titled 'The future of health in Zimbabwe (CQ_Link), in the 80s, the country had a functional health system which had pride in highly trained and motivated workers but the economic slump around 2000 resulted in the crumble of the once thriving health system with others going abroad in search of better jobs.

As of February 1, the country had recorded 33548 cases and 1234 deaths. (CQ_Link)

However, the president in a press statement by Constantino Guveya Dominic Nyikadzino Chiwenga acting president of Zimbabwe and Minister of Health (CO_Sourcesheet) says the coronavirus vaccine will be rolled out freely to all Zimbabweans willing to be vaccinated. (CQ_PDF)

Local Voices

“The government should at least offer psychological support to its frontline workers to make them feel that they are not alone in the face of the pandemic because lack of it demoralizes, “adds Mary (CQ).

Memory who preferred to use her first name for fear of losing her job (CQ_Sourcesheet) after working in the public hospital since 2018 shares the same sentiments with Mary and feels the existing challenges that were there before coronavirus are worsening.

“Medication such as antibiotics, hypertension and diabetes tablets still remain a challenge in the hospital.

I work from 7am to 7 pm and I am only given one mask to use throughout the day without any extra masks to change during the shift,” says Memory (CQ).

Memory (CQ) a mother of three says she feels uncomfortable to go to work and even helping patients scares her because she fears endangering her family whom she might fail to cater for their medical needs.

“If I had an option, I would leave my job and go elsewhere where my concerns will be listened to without fear. I envy those that are resigning and others leaving the country, but I do not have an option because of responsibilities I have here,” she says in a stammering voice.

Enock Dongo president of the Zimbabwe Nurses Association (CQ_Sourcesheet) says nursed are stressed because they are not getting the support that they require.

“When one tests positive they are just given their results and that’s the end of it, there is no form of counseling that follows or transport to take they home, they use the same public transport others are using and it means they can possibly reinfect others in the process,” says Dongo(CQ).

He adds that psychologically the nurses are traumatized and fear going back to work because they know that they will contract the virus from their workspace where personal protective equipment is inadequate, and medication is sometimes unavailable. (CQ_Dongo)

“It is a cause of concern which we need government to intervene, we wish if we had people who care, they would set up a team which can be there to offer counselling and do follow ups, just a visit or call checking on how they are feeling, what they are using , or challenges they are facing even if they are not going to provide with anything, just doing that is very important,” says Dongo (CQ).

Dongo (CQ) says many now also fear being victimized because nurses who were vocal about PPES recently were suspended from work for speaking to the media talking on challenges that they are facing and conditions which are not favorable in hospitals which puts them in danger.

Dixon Chibanda (CQ_Sourcesheet) founding director of Friendship Bench (CQ_Link) an organization that offers mental health support says people develop anxiety when they are positive and in some cases they develop depression when they realize that there is no one to hold their hand and talk to them.

“Counselling helps to contain their fear and to talk about their concerns to manage symptoms such as insomnia,” says Chibanda (CQ)

Norman Matara, secretary general for Zimbabwe Association of Doctors for Human Rights Zimbabwe (CQ_Sourcesheet) says they have been noticing that health workers are under a lot of mental pressure and it is affecting them mentally especially when they witness people dying.

“Before COVID19, we were working under a broken system and we have always been under pressure with doctors and nurses strikes, the morale even to go to work was just low mainly because of poor working conditions and very low remuneration.

So when you add COVID19 pressure to a system that was already broken, its gives so much pressure to our health workers, the morale is already low and people are trying to leave its just that right now its impossible because of lockdowns and travel bans but most people are trying to leave the country,” says Matara (CQ).

He however says his organization has come up with psychosocial support mechanisms to help their members and they are holding zoom meetings to encourage each other and have a psychiatrist offering psychosocial sessions. (CQ_Matara)

Matara(CQ) says as health professionals, they are already at a higher risk of getting mental illness according to studies carried out, “now with the coming with the coming of coronavirus as people are testing positive, with isolation that you go into alone, there is high probability of suffering in the future with depression and it is something that needs to be given much attention,” he adds.

Donald Mujiri, (CQ_Sourcesheet) spokesperson in the Ministry of Health and Child Care (CQ_Link) says the impact of failing to get counselling is huge and

immeasurable because it is dependent upon individual available copying mechanisms.

He however says health Institutions have nurse counsellors who are providing counselling services to patients, relatives and hospital staff. “The same counsellors are now providing counseling services to those who have the COVID 19 infections and their relatives.

“We have an expert team going around our nation giving information specifically on anxiety and depression. Information is being imparted to frontline health workers in order for them to offer basic psychological aid to clients they come in contact with,” says Mujiri(CQ).

In contrast to Mujiri’s (CQ) views, Mary (CQ) says there hasn’t been any service that has been offered to her and others.

Mujiri (CQ) adds that they are currently working in collaboration with United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and World Health Organization (WHO) are offering psychological first aid and psychosocial support to frontline workers, and they have covered three provinces which include Mashonaland Central (CQ), Mashonaland East (CQ) and Mashonaland West(CQ) and hope to cover all provinces by end of February.

LANGUAGE: Gamuchirai Masiyiwa translated some interviews from Shona to English.

EDITOR’S NOTES:

PHOTO CREDIT: Gamuchirai Masiyiwa